

Lanka-US extradition treaty comes into effect

COLOMBO, Jan 14: An extradition treaty between Sri Lanka and the United States has formally gone into effect, replacing a colonial-era arrangement, the foreign ministry here said today, reports AFP.

The documents relating to the ratification of the treaty were exchanged in Washington on Friday, the ministry said.

The US and Sri Lanka signed the extradition treaty in September 1999, replacing a colonial-era US-British agreement on the exchange of suspected criminals signed in 1931 when this island was known as Ceylon.

The new pact, signed at the State Department by Foreign Minister Kadirgamar and US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, closed several loopholes in the original treaty which had become outdated.

Kadirgamar, who first proposed the negotiation of a new treaty in 1997 mostly to deal with terrorist suspects, said he was pleased with the treaty which US Assistant Secretary of State Karl Inderfurth had termed a "landmark."

"It sends a clear signal to all perpetrators that they shall not enjoy a safe haven in our territories," Kadirgamar said, adding that the treaty was testament to both Washington and Colombo's fight against terrorism.

US sailor held in Japan for assaulting women

TOKYO, Jan 14: A US sailor was arrested on the southern Japanese island of Okinawa on Sunday for allegedly assaulting a woman in the second criminal incident in a week in which a US serviceman has been implicated, reports Reuters.

Chief Petty Officer Christopher Sczublewski, 33, was arrested after allegedly hitting a 59-year-old woman in a bar in the early hours on Sunday and injuring her finger, a police spokesman said.

Last Tuesday, US Marine Corporal Raven Gogol, 21, was arrested for allegedly molesting a 16-year-old local girl in Okinawa, which has a heavy concentration of US troops.

Police said Gogol suddenly approached the girl in the dark, lifted up her skirt and took a photograph of her underwear.

That arrest prompted Japan on Friday to recommend that the US military take strict punitive measures to prevent sex crimes by its servicemen, only a week after all curfew restrictions on troops were lifted on the island.

Apartment fire kills five in Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 14: Five members of a Malaysian family died when fire broke out in their 15th floor apartment in the Kuala Lumpur suburb of Sentul early today, reports AFP.

Kaleesvaran Ahegasan, 40, helped his eldest daughter Subatra, 18, to escape via a bathroom window. But he, his wife and their three other children aged between 12 and 17 were killed, Bernama news agency reported.

Neighbour Jamalain Jailani, 36, said she was alerted by shouts of "fire" and screams for help.

"There was thick smoke, I grabbed my three children and went down the stairs from the 15th floor. Several neighbours and members of the public tried to open the door of the apartment which was on fire but failed," she was quoted as saying.

She and her husband took Subatra to hospital, where she is in intensive care.

Peres-Arafat meeting ends without progress

GAZA CITY, Jan 13: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and former Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres made no apparent progress in meetings here Saturday aimed at ending months of violence, but further talks are planned, reports AFP.

Arafat and Peres, now Israel's Regional Cooperation Minister, headed the negotiating teams as Israel and the Palestinians finally returned to the negotiating table, following up the last-minute peace bid by outgoing US President Bill Clinton.

The two sides decided to continue their talks "in the next few days," Arafat's political advisor Nabil Abu Rudeina told AFP, without specifying whether Arafat and Peres would attend the next meeting.

Abu Rudeina said the talks had been devoted mainly "to the negotiations on the final status" of the Palestinian Territories and "to the importance of reaching an agreement on all matters."

A spokesman for the Israeli government in Jerusalem agreed that "a further meeting will be held in the next few days," and added that

a date would be set Sunday.

The spokesman said the aim of the discussions was to "consolidate the decline in the violence" and to "reach a positive conclusion before the end of the mandate of Bill Clinton" who leaves office on January 20.

However Palestinian Information Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo told AFP that "the delegations discussed various issues and the issue of the final status, but we achieved no progress," and that "the Clinton initiative is not a basis for the peace process." "The delegations will meet again Sunday or Monday," Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat told journalists, but he too said that "very big differences remain" between the two parties.

Peres left Gaza City late Saturday after meeting Arafat for two and a half hours, both one-on-one and also with negotiators from either side, a senior Palestinian official told AFP.

The Palestinian side comprised negotiators Ahmad Qorei and Erakat, Abed Rabbo, and the head of preventive security in the Gaza Strip, Mohammad Dahlan.

The Israeli delegation was made up of Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben Ami, former army chief of staff Amnon Lipkin-Shahak and Gilad Sher, chief of staff to caretaker Prime Minister Ehud Barak, an Israeli official said.

After the departure of the Israeli delegation, Arafat held further talks with his team of negotiators, the official added.

Arafat and Peres, a leading Israeli dove and current regional cooperation minister, shared in the 1993 Nobel Prize for signing the Oslo peace agreement, which paved the way for Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Their meeting had been expected to be mainly devoted to working on the three-week-old Clinton peace proposals, Peres said during an interview with Israel's second private television channel.

He also expressed fears the peace process was entering an even more volatile phase with a US presidential transition and a looming victory by Israel's right-wing camp in February 6 elections for prime minister.

Kashmir's first village elections in 23 years

SRINAGAR, Jan 14: Thousands of security personnel were on alert today in freezing conditions to prevent Islamic militants from thwarting India-controlled Kashmir's first village elections in 23 years, reports AFP.

On Monday, the first phase of voting will cover Kupwara, Poonch and Rajouri districts close to the cease-fire line dividing Kashmir between India and Pakistan. The eight-phase exercise will be completed in March.

A top separatist leader, Mirwaiz Omer Farooq, warned that the election was ill-timed and could scuttle the peace process initiated by Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

Farooq's All Parties Hurriyat Conference and Pakistan-based militant groups demanding self-determination for Kashmir have asked voters to boycott the elections, which they say will legitimise New

Delhi's control over Kashmir.

"Vajpayee's unilateral cease-fire against Islamic militants has brought some peace to the valley and has raised hopes of a peaceful settlement between India and Pakistan," said Jan Mohammed Wani, a 47-year-old businessman, in Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu-Kashmir state.

"The village elections could lead to more bloodshed in Kashmir," said Wani.

Panchayats, or village councils, organise community programmes and help build local infrastructure in India, a country where nearly 70 per cent of its 1 billion people live in hundreds of thousands of villages.

There has been no local democracy in Kashmir since the insurgency began in 1989. Before that, though nominated village councils functioned off and on, no direct elections to the panchayats have been held in more than two

decades.

Authorities say the staggered voting will allow security forces to move to various districts and guard against attacks by the guerillas. Some areas in the Himalayan territory are snowbound, where voting will be possible next month or in March.

The voters' turnout will be a test for pro-India Farooq Abdullah, the state's top elected official. Less than six per cent voters exercised their franchise when Abdullah's National Conference came to power in the state in 1996. The turnout was less than 12 per cent when voting was held for parliamentary seats in 1999.

Most people responded to the boycott call by the guerilla groups, which demand an independent Kashmir or a choice to merge with neighboring Islamic Pakistan.

Relatives search for survivors as quake destroys 330 houses in El Salvador

SANTA TECLA, El Salvador, Jan 14: At Las Colinas near the capital, hundreds of ordinary El Salvadorans worked through the night desperately searching for people buried in the ruins of their homes, after a huge earthquake triggered a massive landslide, reports AFP.

Sitting in a state of shock on a piece of broken concrete, 43-year-old Marta Bonilla watched a mechanical digger laboriously remove the pieces of masonry that was all that remained of her home from Saturday's quake.

Her husband and four of her six children were buried there she explained helplessly to onlookers. In various parts of the neighbourhood, which is 12 kilometres west of the capital San Salvador, rescue brigades working through the night continued to unearth the bodies of children and adults.

Some 330 homes which had stood at a foot of wooded hillside in Las Colinas were estimated to have been destroyed or completely covered by the landslide triggered by an earthquake measuring between 7.4 and 7.9 on the Richter scale, which struck at 11:33 am (2333 BST) Saturday.

Some heavy machinery was at work, but local people used anything to hand -- sticks and picks -- to pull off the rubble. Hundreds of volunteers, soldiers and members of the police formed human chains to remove earth from the site.

White-coated rescue workers, who attempted to keep a tally of the rising death toll, were entrusted with the bodies as these were found.

Oscar Ortiz, mayor of Santa Tecla



Volunteers and rescue workers dig through the earth slide that buried some 300 homes in the Las Colinas community near Santa Tecla, 12 km west of San Salvador, on Saturday. The slide was caused by an earthquake measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale. --AFP photo

municipality where Las Colinas is located, said he believed as many as 500 homes could be buried under the landslide.

Some of those who had lost relatives were highly critical of the construction company for building homes in a risky location.

Among them was journalist Claudia Rivera, who said that her brother, sister-in-law and their small baby were still buried in Las

Colinas.

"We have only been able to find bent metal parts of the baby's cradle, but we can't find the child's little body. We are feeling hopeless," added her husband, Erick Lemus.

The search dragged on as the persistent drone of electric generators gave floodlights power at this and at other sites in the country where rescue work continued apace.

Televised images from all over the country late Saturday showed collapsed houses, wrecked roads, children wandering through half-destroyed shantytowns, and distraught people praying for help for their family members.

At least 136 people were killed in El Salvador, with some 500 injured according to rescue officials.

Junta orders media to halt attacks on Suu Kyi

YANGON, Jan 14: Myanmar's junta has ordered state-run media to halt its stream of attacks on opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, in a further sign of a thaw between the two sides as they edge towards a landmark dialogue, reports AFP.

For the first time in years, the weekend's official press carried none of the usual cartoons and commentaries slamming Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy.

Military sources told AFP that the regime ordered the "Mirror" daily and the English- and Burmese-language editions of the "New Light

of Myanmar" to stop hurling vicious personal insults at the opposition leader.

The move came at the request of UN special envoy to Myanmar Razali Ismail, who brokered secret talks between Aung San Suu Kyi and junta number-three Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt that began late last year.

Razali put the request to Khin Nyunt during a meeting in Yangon earlier this month, the sources said.

Diplomats here have for some time been urging the junta to halt the petty attacks on Aung San Suu Kyi, arguing that they poison the

political atmosphere in the military-run country.

But with the announcement last week of the secret talks, aimed at paving the way for the first official dialogue between the two warring sides since 1994, the mood in Yangon appears to be improving.

"The move by the authorities to desist from further NLD bashing, especially its leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, is a positive one and it is hoped other such gestures of goodwill will follow," said a political analyst in Yangon.

The junta may now decide to release jailed NLD party members,

especially the sick and infirm, to show it is serious about building confidence between the two sides, analysts said.

Aung San Suu Kyi has been held under house arrest since September 22 since she and a group of senior NLD leaders attempted to travel to the northern city Mandalay on party business.

The Nobel peace laureate has been a favourite target of the official press -- daily cartoons and commentaries threaten her with expulsion and lampoon her as a tool of Burma's colonial rulers, Britain.

Time to defend national unity: Megawati

JAKARTA, Jan 14: Indonesian Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri today told 100,000 supporters of her Indonesian Democracy Party-Struggle (PDIP) that national unity was at stake and called on them to defend its integrity, but without violence, reports AFP.

"PDIP should consolidate the party, to continue and safeguard the purity of reforms and prevent the disintegration of the nation and the state," Megawati said at a mass gathering to commemorate the party's 28th anniversary at the Senayan main sports stadium.

"There is one fundamental thing that should always be remembered and upheld together, that the unity of the state and the nation stands above all," she said.

Since the fall of the iron-fisted government of former president Suharto in May 1998, Indonesia has been experiencing rising separatism and communal violence in several provinces.

"In these last few years, we have been facing really heavy challenges which could possibly threaten our existence and future as a nation."

"We are in the phase of survival of the nation, the existence of our nation is currently being tested," Megawati said.

She said that the nation's prob-

lems were not the responsibility of a single group but of the whole nation.

"I am calling on all components of the nation to safeguard the unity and cohesion of this free nation," she said.

She also said that the level of violence and terror experienced by the country in the recent past had now reached a dangerous level.

She cited the Christmas Eve bombings at churches and clergyman's homes across Indonesia that left 18 people killed. She called the bombings "crimes against humanity that cannot be justified by whatever reasons."

"Let us say, from now on, to say 'No' to any attempt at using violence and terror. Let us free this nation from the traps of violence and terror," she said.

PDIP was a splinter group of the Indonesian Democracy Party (PDI) set up as a fusion of several nationalist and Christian parties in 1973.

It was a faction loyal to Megawati who was ousted from the PDI leadership in 1996, two years ahead of her term, by a government-orchestrated party congress.

Reagan undergoes surgery

SANTA MONICA, California, Jan 14: Former US president Ronald Reagan was recovering in hospital Saturday after "successful" surgery to repair a fractured right hip, his doctor said, reports AFP.

The operation on Reagan, who turns 90 next month, was performed early Saturday after he broke his hip the previous evening in a fall at his home in the upscale Los Angeles suburb of Bel Air.

"He's doing well, we're happy," surgeon Kevin Ehrhart told a news conference. He added, however: "It's a serious injury" and his prognosis is "guarded."

"He's a patient (who is) 90 years old with other medical problems," Ehrhart said.

Reagan, who suffers from Alzheimer's, was admitted to St. John's Health Centre in Santa Monica, just west of Los Angeles, late Friday. The operation began at 8:30 am Saturday and lasted just over an hour.

"The various parts of the fracture were put together with a series of ... pins and screws," Ehrhart said. Though the former president is nearly 90, "he (has) very healthy tissue, very strong, healthy bone."

Falungong conference opens in HK

HONG KONG, Jan 14: China's banned Falungong sect today opened an international meeting in Hong Kong viewed as a major challenge to Beijing's authority in the territory, reports AFP.

Addressing some 700 followers from 23 countries at the government-run City Hall, Falungong speakers praised Hong Kong for granting them access to its facilities for the first time.

"We would like to express deep gratitude to the Hong Kong government for allowing us to use this wonderful venue," a spokeswoman said.

The message preceded a harrowing account by one Falungong follower of his brutal treatment at the hands of Chinese security forces after a demonstration in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

The conference, the third of its kind to be held in the territory but the first at a government venue, has attracted worldwide interest due to

the group's volatile relationship with mainland Chinese authorities.

On Saturday, followers gathered for a day of peaceful protests amid accusations Hong Kong authorities bowed to Chinese pressure by refusing to allow 13 practitioners to attend the conference.

By Sunday, four followers were still being detained at Chep Lap Kok airport, while nine others had been put on return flights, according to the Hong Kong government.

An immigration department spokesman said the followers were refused entry because they lacked appropriate visas, but the move has sparked fears the group could be banned in the territory.

Some 800 Falungong members from 20 countries marched to the liaison office of Beijing's central government here to deliver a petition urging Chinese President Jiang Zemin to stop persecuting practitioners.

'US considered strikes against China's nuclear facilities'

WASHINGTON, Jan 14: The United States and Taiwan considered military action against suspected nuclear facilities in China in the early 1960s in order to prevent Beijing from becoming a nuclear power, two US researchers said Saturday, reports AFP.

"They considered a wide variety of options including commando raids and airstrikes," said Jeffrey Richelson, a researcher with the National Security Archive, a local think tank.

"Some operations were supposed to be joined with the Republic of China," said Richelson, referring to the official name of Taiwan.

The findings come from analysis of dozens of declassified White House, Central Intelligence Agency and State Department documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act by Richelson and his fellow researcher, William Burr.

Both spoke to AFP about their discoveries, which also appear in the winter 2000/2001 issue of International Security, a review published by Harvard University.

President John F. Kennedy saw the prospect of a nuclear-armed China as a dangerous threat that

could undermine US interests in Asia and bring instability to the region, where India was particularly wary of Beijing's nuclear ambitions, the researchers said.

Preliminary preparations for possible military action began as early as 1961, according to the researchers.

"There is more to be learned, but the CIA was involved in some kind of operational planning," stressed Burr.

Efforts to thwart China's nuclear weapons program moved into a more practical stage in September 1963, when the Kennedy administration hosted in Washington General Chiang Ching-kuo, son of Taiwanese nationalist ruler Chiang Kai-shek and chief of the breakaway island's intelligence.

"They definitely discussed some kind of paramilitary operation," said Burr. "A join US-Taiwanese planning group was set up."

Under the plan, Taiwanese commandos were to launch raids against nuclear facilities in Central China, particularly plants in Lanchow and Baotao where weapons-grade fissile materials were suspected of being manufactured,

the researchers said.

Airstrikes against the facilities were also considered, they pointed out.

The documents indicate that the driving force behind this contingency planning was Kennedy's national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy.

"He was certainly the key person," said Burr. "But I think he was fulfilling President Kennedy's wishes."

Several factors, however, worked against him.

"There was a lot of uncertainty and a lot of misunderstanding about what the Chinese were doing," said Richelson.

Besides a lack of intelligence information, Bundy ran into opposition from parts of the US government bureaucracy and the Soviet Union, which he apparently wanted but failed to get on board, according to the researchers.

At the State Department, Bundy found an ardent critic in the person of Robert Johnson, a member of the Policy Planning Council, who argued that a nuclear China would be acting on the international arena more cautiously than before, the

documents showed.

"There was certainly not a uniform view as to what the results of the Chinese capability would be in terms of policy," Richelson pointed out.

On top of that, Moscow, whose relations with China were rapidly deteriorating at that time, was loath to even consider military action against its neighbour.

Bundy discussed his ideas with then-Soviet ambassador in Washington Anatoly Dobrynin twice -- in May and October 1963 -- but was spurned on both occasions, according to Burr.

"The idea of cooperation with Americans was politically dangerous for the Russians," Burr said.

After Kennedy's assassination in November 1963, the administration of president Lyndon Johnson mulled the plans for a while but soon abandoned them. Beijing exploded a nuclear device in October 1964.